Our Bleak Midwinter

By Theta Mandel

Edited by Aristide Twain

THIS EDITION (2024) PUBLISHED BY THE CHESHIRE HOUSE

FIRST EDITION (2023) PUBLISHED BY ARCBEATLE PRESS

Copyright © Theta Mandel, 2023

All rights reserved.

This story is a work of fiction. Any similarity to other narratives or stories is done entirely within the bounds of parody and/or satire, or is permitted due to the narrative or story being in the public domain. Beyond the targets thereof, any resemblance to persons living or dead, or events past or present, is co-incidental.

The rights of Theta Mandel to be identified as the author of this work are asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

—

Zadellin & associated concepts © Theta Mandel
Greater & Lesser Time Elementals, the Lightbringers © Aristide Twain

In the bleak midwinter/ When we cannot wait anymore
We shall wake from our slumber/ And fight for the right to see snow.

* * *

Day One: I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas

"And, of course, I know you're all counting down to Christmas — only eighteen days to go! Abby, would you like to flip the calendar?"

Abby dropped her head slightly, reaching a hand up to brush synthetic strands of brown hair behind her ear, and the kids around her giggled.

"Miss, she's a Jew. She hates Christmas"

She stilled.

Ms Carol sighed. "Of course. Sorry, Abby. It is important to be respectful of all religions around this time. Happy holidays to everyone — class dismissed."

Abby was used to being the only Jewish kid in her class. No one else from her neighbourhood had kids her age, which meant no familiar faces at school. She was used to feeling alone.

She wasn't used to correcting people on her culture, though. Quietly, she whispered: "I just don't celebrate something I don't believe in", but the class was already filing out, and she was always too nervous to say something brave when people could actually hear her.

Everything you say is brave when there's no one standing behind you.

Piling on her pink bobble-hat, puffy coat, and knitted scarf, the teen self-consciously adjusted her hair in the reflection of the window before she walked out of the door. Everyone knew it was a wig, just like everyone knew she hadn't always been Abby, but somehow that just made the accessory all that more important. It was the strongest piece of armour she had because it was *hers*. A self-made woman valued the parts of herself that she chose, because those were the parts that belonged to the real her.

Worn grey trainers padded outside to sounds of children's laughter. Politely, she stretched her face to the expected level of niceness — a small smile — as Olive, her neighbour in maths class, waved goodbye.

School had always been isolating. Ironic, since education was also her main point of contact with the world outside her neighbourhood. As a kid, she'd found the comfort of her grandma, telling stories by the crackling fire, was more

than enough a taste of the world outside to satiate her, but now she longed to learn more, to expand her world beyond those two points. Home, school, and back. With the world set up the way it was, travel would be difficult, but real-world problems never limited dreams.

Pulling her bag strap more firmly onto her shoulder, she clambered aboard the school bus, snaking her way to the back — she was always the last stop anyway. She checked her watch — 40 krons until the yellow vehicle pulled into neighbourhood E-18. Plenty of time to get some homework done. She'd left her tablet at home, so there wasn't much else to do.

The questions were easy, so she got through them quickly —

"Why is our planet called Eos 6?"

"How many neighbourhoods are there on Eos 6?"

"What was the name of the peace treaty that allowed different factions to come together and live on our planet in harmony?"

Modern history was such a pointless subject. Even babies knew this stuff.

Eventually, they pulled into her stop, just as the sun began to set. Abby gathered her papers into her bag and trooped off the bus, half-heartedly tipping an imaginary hat at the bus driver. The last child standing.

She coughed a little as she walked towards her neighbourhood, the smoke from the Azanon factory warming her as she slipped past the external vents and pumps. Drawing her scarf around her mouth and nose protected her somewhat, though the smog stung her eyes something fierce. She turned away and ran until she was past the worst of it, her mind on home.

Building a factory right next to E-18 was supposed to bring more jobs. All Abby knew was that it had taken the snow away.

When she was four, she'd gone sledding on the nearby foothills, extended arm scooping up snow as she went, ready to lob. The next winter, the factory had moved in, and the slopes were dirtied with soot and smoke. A few years later, the snow came thin and late. A few years after that, the snow didn't come at all.

But none of that mattered because she was almost home, the welcoming smell of pierogi and schnitzel carried through the air. A pleasant warmth, so unlike the acrid heaviness from the factory. Slipping down the dirt lanes, she skipped along the main street until she reached her house — set a little back from the street, the dark wood-substitute panelling and lighter window trimmings spelled home.

The click in the lock as she opened the door was submerged under chatter from the kitchen. A low voice that could only belong to her father was trailing into the hallway, chastised by someone older, her voice cracked but pleasant.

"If Mr Oakleigh approves the expansion next week — and he will — we won't be the only neighbourhood with one of his Azanon Industries factories on their doorstep. Mr Carly is making sure we are all on our best behaviour."

"Silly boy! You should never have left the bakery."

"Mama! We get more money this way. How else can we look after you, right?"

"Well, back in *my* day, we never would have let ourselves be demeaned like this. I don't like how that man talks to you."

Abby dumped her bag down. "Dadda! Memaw! I'm back!"

"Good — do you have homework?"

"Only a little."

"Come in here and help your old grandma make schnitzel"

Abby grabbed her homework out of her bag and padded along the tiles to the kitchen.

"Your father is being a spineless fool. Tell him not to be such a suck up."

Abby blinked.

"Uh, dad? Don't be such a suck up. Also, what's happening?"

Benjamin sighed. "Nothing to worry about, Abby. Your grandma is just giving the same old schtick. Doesn't like my job, that's all. Azanon Industries' CEO is visiting next week to approve this big expansion, so it will be a bit stressful- you'll have to go easy on your old dad, huh? So go, help your grandma with dinner. Nothing to worry about."

Abby laughed nervously. "Wow, two 'nothing to worry about's in under a minute. Super reassuring."

Her dad hung back for a moment, eyeing Abby's grandma. "Right. I've got some admin to do, but I'll be back for dinner. Be good!"

With a kiss on his daughter's forehead, he left.

Abby's grandma tutted. "That man is making a mistake. He's throwing his life away."

"He's worked at the factory for six years now, I don't think he'll change his mind easily."

Abby slowly chopped chicken in silence as her grandma diced potatoes for the latkes. Luckily, the hours were still long, so they had time before sundown.

"I got some questions for homework on the PV — since you were actually there, could you help make sure I got them right?" Abby retrieved a pen and her papers, laying the pen carefully over her most recent answer. Any time she could spend with her grandma while she was feeling healthy enough to cook was time worth extending as much as she could — lying was necessary.

"Of course, bubala. You know, most people don't call it the Pardes Voyage — they won't let you write that in one of your essays."

"I know memaw. Don't worry, I'll call it Expedition X if I get a question on it in my test, but that isn't until after the winter holiday. So, what was the treaty that allowed everyone to live on the same planet? The one made at the end of the riots."

Abby smiled at the gleam in her grandma's eye — she loved recounting the old days. As a kid, she'd eaten those stories of hers whole for breakfast, lunch, and dinner — *Your memaw was one of the first rebels… The name Leah Stein is on the constitution…. People sang in praise of what we did… It was the closest most of those people had ever come to a war…*

That night, after touching the flame of the shamash to the right-most candle, they ate schnitzel and latkes as the sun finished her daily rounds. As the first flames burned, Abby offered her grandma her arm and helped her settle under her quilt.

She settled beside her, head tucked under her grandma's arm. She steadied herself as Leah coughed, her body shaking with the action.

"Tell me a story, memaw." Abby's voice was soft and placative; encouraging. Even the slow pauses in her voice had a quiet purpose.

Leah laughed. "Haven't you heard them all?"

"Exactly." She was firm — around this time of year, she got so tired. She stifled a yawn and settled in.

Since she was a child, she had been rocked to sleep by stories of the Pardes Voyage. Before then, on Earth, life had been hell. The skies had been burning,

the cities kept together with duct-tape and punishments by cruel overlords, and the oceans rose until every major river had burst its banks. Every human had fled or was on their way, so the skies were crowded with the fire of hundreds of ships — country ships, private ships, the Noah's Ark project — fleets filled the atmosphere.

Leah had fled. She never told Abby about her past before she got on the Pardes Voyage, a council project to evacuate a last, stubborn area, but she never stopped talking about her time on the ship itself.

When she talked of the old days, her cracked voice became melodious, heavy with stories. "The rebellion began because of our differences. We were groups of people with different ideas, shoved into a small, cramped space for nearly two years while we found a suitable planet on which to build a home. As tensions rose, so did the extremity of our methods — you could be attacked in the hall if someone recognised you as one of a certain faction. Four months into the fighting, I took charge. Before, I'd been…"

Vocal. Always vocal, never loud. Always loud.

Can't let them see me but they have to hear me or it's all for nothing.

I stand on the bow of an odyssey, setting out into endless waters, no chance of return. And I know we won't all live.

They squabble all day and night, recreating the problems we faced — the whole point was to leave this all behind — so I had to stand up for what is right and say no more.

I put my foot down, Abby, your old memaw put her foot down and stopped a war. Someone has to take charge and speak. When all you can hear is swords clashing, silence is not rebellion, it is submission.

All wars have one thing in common: they end. No one else would show them that, so I got my friends together and we made a statement, and that was that.

She'd heard it all before; so, so many times. Leah was always a little fuzzy on the details. As much as she liked to remind her own flesh and blood of what she fought for, what she did, she didn't want to dwell. The ugly truth lay just beyond that glimmering surface; a woman with a megaphone who was tired of fighting still shed blood to get to a place where she would never have to see red again.

Every citizen of Eos 6 was descended from murderers.

Today, though, the ending was a little different. Leah trailed off, heaved herself up, and went to the window. Grime settled between each grain of glass, got into the tiniest crevices, dirtying all it touched.

"And now it all happens again… We fought so hard to end the war, not win it, me and those friends of mine. But history always repeats."

She paused a while.

"You know, back home, I read stories from the twentieth century about a world that glistened with snow and cold. I didn't grow up with that — factories and shuttles and coal had heated our planet beyond repair. I hoped, just a little, that creating a new paradise would mean I might get to live in one of those stories. I just wish I could have seen the snow."

That night, Abby dreamed of worlds of swirling white.

That night, Abby dreamed of her world, her neighbourhood, cold enough for snow, heaps of the stuff thumping down until she saw her grandma smile.

That night, Abby dreamed of her classmates, their neighbourhoods with a sputtering factory overshadowing each and every one of their homes. No more snow.

The next day, Abby knew what she had to do.

No more factories on the brink of their homes. No more low-level heat and smog, driving away the first frosts.

No more looking out the window and dreaming of something that could never come.

Day Two: Finders, Keepers

Abby knew that she had to find a way to keep Azanon Industries from expanding to the borders of other neighbourhoods. She just had to find a way to make it happen.

That morning was a Friday. Her dad kissed her goodbye, then went off to his lousy job for a lousy company. She almost stopped him, asked for his advice, but she couldn't let anyone know of her plan.

Andrew Oakleigh was visiting his workplace in six days. If she could find a way to sabotage something, make the factory look bad, then Oakleigh would think that his factories don't work, so wouldn't expand. Or at least, not so close to civilisation.

Abby chewed the ends of her hair all through maths, distracted. Who needs quadratic formulas? We're starting a revolution.

When you're young, anything is a rebellion. The difference between a cheeky child and the leader of an uprising is little more than a good cause and some follow-through. After all, isn't that all Leah had when she stopped the X riots? *Isn't that all I need?*

At breaktime, she talked to Janice, a fellow trans person from her physics class — apparently there was talk of a possible new factory going up, less than a mile from her house. Janice had gone sledding every Christmas since she was little. Abby hadn't been sledding in years.

She remembered the snow angels the pair of them would make in her backyard in E-3, the way they'd be coated and freezing but deliriously happy, rolling snow into the shape of monsters to hide around the garden. Scaresnows, they'd call them, making them as realistic as possible to surprise her little brother.

She knew Janice would never make another scaresnow if Azanon expanded further towards their homes. She opened her mouth, but did not say a word — if she shared her idea, surely Janice would tell their teacher. They hadn't been close, properly close, in years. Besides, Janice had no idea how difficult it was; hiding behind your scarf as a makeshift mask, winding off your layers and throwing away your wellies because there was no biting cold to protect against. She wouldn't understand. Of that, Abby was certain — no, this would be her own private fight, the sole lonely warrior against the might of an industrial empire.

She accessed the galactic statistics net on her tablet to check. It didn't have to be a disaster- maybe, she wouldn't have to take up arms today.

The digipad beeped, information unfurling under her touch. She quickly made a graph, and the results were damning — after a decade of Azanon having more than twenty factories on each planet they had expanded on, the average global temperature saw a noticeable drop.

The evidence was all laid out before her.

Quintonnia. Koerl 7. Hexxibb. Glostol. Nowhere had been unaffected — each one reported unstable weather patterns within a few years of Azanon's expansion, after decades of stability.

She couldn't back out.

By the time she returned home, she was forming a plan… Some minor sabotage here, a little industrial espionage there, and Andrew Oakleigh would give up on Eos 6.

"Abby, come help with dinner! Your old man can't do it all alone."

"Coming, dad!" she called out, trying to shove down that feeling that she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't, to the tune of her grandma's grumbles — *I'm helping too, you know… Ungrateful… What do you think I do all day if not cook*? Her father always laughed it off.

Just as she was turning towards the kitchen, a flash of white tugged at the corner of her eye. A piece of paper, some drawings in blue ink… Abby's saving grace. Schematics of part of the factory, just lying on her father's desk! Greedily, she snatched it up, twirling it between her fingers until it was a thin cigarette shape that she could slide neatly into her bag.

"Abby!"

"Coming!" she replied, hurrying downstairs.

She knew she had to do what she planned, and yet, she felt a lump in her chest all through the blessings — was this the will of Hashem, or was it against? Would she even know before it was too late?

After dinner, she asked her grandma outright — "did you ever worry, when you fought in the Pardes Voyage, that it was against Hashem's will? How did you know it was right?"

Her heart beat faster and faster as she tried desperately not to think about *why* she was asking, as though her family would see the deceit in her eyes. There was some acrid smell too, something burning and punishing, stuck in her nose. She took a breath and hoped she wouldn't have to lie.

Leah snorted. Abby was worried there would be follow-up questions, and here, Leah was seeming not to take her seriously at all.

"Why would I? I was trying to help my neighbours make peace, so we all may live, side by side. This feels an honourable enough cause that I would like to believe He would be proud."

Abby bit her lip. "But didn't you have to, you know, hurt people? To reach your goal?" She didn't know why she was prodding further. Leah was looking at her strangely, and her father shot her a glare.

"Stop interrogating your grandma. Let's play a game — how about chess?".

With the subject effectively changed, Abby had gotten away with her line of questioning, and yet she couldn't help but wish that it could have lasted longer. Just a little more advice, just a little help… But noble causes are so often fought alone.

At night, she snapped a photo of the schematic, tracing it over in her mind again and again before carefully smoothing the original with a book, praying that no creases would be visible. Heart in her throat, she snuck across to her dad's study, keeping her footsteps light so the small creaks of the floorboards would go unnoticed. Still, at every small sound, she flinched and held her breath.

Five steps to the doorway. The squeaky floorboard there has to be leapt over; the landing is too hard. Surely, someone will come out, see her, see the guilt written in her face. Ask her why she's up and she would crumble.

The fear doesn't make her turn back. She slips the paper back on her dad's desk, then practically runs back to her bed and dives under the covers. Breathing heavily, she practices slowing the sounds — in, out, wait. Practice. Patience.

All this will be useful for tomorrow, when she will sneak into the factory.

The schematic showed the location of a conveyor belt control, right by a window. She could sneak in and just delete a few lines of code, or remove a small component…

It was all so simple in the movies. She'd work it out.

In the small hours of the night, a loud sound from outside made her freeze, but it came from far away. She tried to go back to sleep- she'd need it for tomorrow's adventure.

* * *

Meanwhile, somewhere over the horizon, klaxons were ringing.

"Hurry, her heart's failing — I don't think we can make it!" Zerlan bit zir lip as the living ship rocked around them.

"Come on, be a little optimistic. What can we do?" The captain tried to keep the panic out of their voice, but Zerlan knew. Ze always knew.

"What *can* we do — It's too late. We're not going to make it!"

Nervous wires jumped and hissed, sputtering electricity like a vein bleeding out.

"Yes, we are! Just hold on!"

"What's that, over there?"

Zerlan took a closer look at the screen, an eye peering out through the dark. *Just a little further…*

"We're over a planet. Eos 6. There's some foothills just below us. I think that's where we're headed!"

Ze grimaced. At least their graves would be covered in flowers.

"Hang on to something! We're crashing!"

And with that, the ground of Eos 6 greeted a trio of alien visitors for the first time…

Day Three: Don't Worry, We're Trespassing Too

Thick light sluggishly rolled in through Abby's windows, the sun made ragged from the cloying layer of smoke settled about the town. She pulled the flower-patterned comforter tightly over her head, then groaned, realising that she'd have to actually get up if she wanted to get anything done.

But today was a Saturday. She could sleep in without school bells tugging at her conscience- school wasn't demanding anything from her today. Of course, it was the sabbath — should she wait? Would G-d want her to wait?

Too much to think about. She stayed in bed.

A half hour later, she gave up trying to get back to sleep. Sent a quick prayer — *If you care, forgive me* — and rolled out from under her nest.

Her teachers never took "But miss, it was Sabbath! I can't do work then!" as an excuse, but all she had was one little history essay to complete, so she could put it off until tomorrow. No sense in disappointing G-d twice in the same day.

She told her dad that she was going for a walk, and tried to ignore that smell again; a nasty, acrid burning. She had never really been one for lying- maybe she just needed more practice.

"A walk? Where's good to walk around here?"

Her heart fluttered. Her brain deserted her in her moment of need. "Oh, just around. Maybe up by the foothills? I'll be back in a couple hours, tops. Promise." Her dad stopped bustling around the kitchen, tea in hand.

If he asks me outright if I'm lying, I'll crumble, I know it.

Instead, he asked: "Are you alright? The last couple days, you've seemed a bit… distracted."

"No, I'm fine." *Too quick. Slower, slower.* She swallowed. "I've just got a lot going on at school, and really need to clear my head." She made eye contact. He met it.

They both waited a beat.

"Okay, be careful! Love you." In a flash, he was all smiles, waving her off cheerily. Abby felt her heart rate return to normal as she got outside. The cool air had no effect as she strode off towards the factory; she had a job to do.

Abby was lucky — most people in E-18 weren't too observant, so going for a walk on the Sabbath wouldn't be too frowned upon — hell, she knew people

who weren't religious at all, and would schedule their shopping for Saturday because they knew the shops would be half empty.

By the time she reached the structure, the day was overcast and gloomy. She sneaked around the perimeter a little, because people always did that in heist movies, and when she was sure she was out of sight of the guards, she climbed over the fence. She'd worn thick trousers under her skirt, so the sharp points at the top didn't bother her; she was over in a flash, exhilarated. She had paced for longer than she'd have liked, debating whether to truly go ahead with this, but in the end she was already here, wasn't she? She may as well climb on over.

She used a stick she'd nabbed from the ground to push a security camera out of the way, then pushed open the window directly below the room she needed, clenching her abdomen as she hauled herself inside.

Saturday seemed to be mainly maintenance — some windows were open for ventilation, but the staffing was minimal, so Abby could get through the storage rooms largely undisturbed. Armed with only an apron and a mop, she wouldn't be able to easily pass for a janitor upon even the slightest inspection, but she thought the disguise was at least fun. It really completed the experience — breaking in, moving the camera, dressing up… And now, sabotage.

Steeling herself, she peered at the schematics on her pad. She'd traced over the drawing in her notes app and then deleted the original photo, because somehow, that made it feel more private.

Just one turn here, then up the stairs.

Her boots clattered against the metal stairs; inhaling sharply, she paused, listening for signs that she'd given herself away, for guards about to descend on her, but all she could hear was a hoover in the distance. Regulating her breaths carefully through her nose, she crept up slower, checking over her shoulder at every creak.

Eventually, she made it to the top, practically sprinting across the hall. The walls were metal, too, everything grey and dull. How did her father stand it? As she took one last glance over her shoulder, she noticed the assembly lines, visible at the end of the hallway — huge, sprawling creatures, planted across the factory floor everywhere they could fit one. Dozens of cleaners worked diligently to scrub every nook and cranny of those assembly lines, making everything perfect for the big day.

Abby sucked in air through her teeth, then immediately regretted it, suppressing a cough through her sleeve. Suddenly, her heart rate increased, thoughts racing past — *whatifsomeoneheardthat* and *whatwilldadthink* and *grandmacoulddoitsomuchbetter*. In a panic, she thrusted her palm at the door in front of her, dodging into the room. A computer sat on top of a laminate desk that reminded her of the ones at school. From its back sprang a jumbled mess of wires — like motor neurons from a central nervous system, taking information to all the limbs the hands, the legs, the back. The servers perched on the floor as squatting toucans, red pads as beaks and wheels for clawed feet.

Her scribbled 3 a.m. instructions in her padnotes just said to 'sabotage a server??'. Abby suddenly realised that she had absolutely no idea how to hack a computer. Well, there were exposed wires… Before that thought had fully formed, her hands were nestled in the wad of minicables, and all she could think was *I might see snow yet*.

She should pull. She couldn't pull. She —

"In here? Are you sure?"

Voices! Hide!

Scrambling to wedge herself behind a server block, she listened.

The door creaked open.

"Zerlan, this place looks like some computer terminal. Are you absolutely certain the cardio-ethylate is here?"

"Nards, Nardy, Nardeth — do not worry about a *thing*, okay? I know what I'm doing. Hmm, this place doesn't look quite right- we could still use that computer though, search for likely places in the databanks? Maybe there's a map…"

These newcomers — they smelled different to the people in Abby's town. Something ancient, all sandalwood and juniper-berries that nearly made her sneeze — they weren't from around here. And they might not even be workers at the factory, given how lost they seemed.

"Both of you, hush! This place is mostly empty, but there's still guards around. We need to be careful. Just, hurry it up, Zerl? Do what you have to."

"Yes, Mrell," the pair replied in unison; some practised in-joke, their voices fake-exasperated, like this 'Mrell' was always telling them what to do.

A figure with brown hair and deeply tanned skin came into sight, deftly tapping away at the computer keyboard. Abby could just about make out some software program opening, then frustrated grunts as the definitely-not-a-factory-worker was denied access.

"I can't get in! There's some real security around here — I'd need my own computer, and more time than we have now. It's doable, just not without my tools."

"I'm not sure we can hang around this planet much longer. Someone will notice us, and I don't think that's such a good idea when we can't make a quick getaway".

This planet? Abby's mind raced with the possibilities. At school, they'd always been warned of outsiders, of how their planet was supposed to be a paradise, but that heaven came at a cost. Their entire system was delicately balanced on a single pivot point, and any outside influences could send them swinging.

Even in individual neighbourhoods, the residents seemed to keep to themselves. It was as if the whole planet was too afraid of making noise, of letting other people in. E-18's regulations said all were welcome, and yet, so few came. Janice's neighbourhood had been founded by isolationists, so was much stricter — only visitors allowed. No outsiders for longer than a few hours without express permission and extensive vetting from the council. Even getting a sleepover had been practically impossible- in many ways, they'd stopped hanging out because of how difficult it was to see each other. As Janice wasn't allowed to be away for long enough to make the trip to Abby's, and Abby couldn't come to her for more than the length of a movie, the whole thing felt a little pointless. Where could they go from here?

If these people really were aliens — the epitome of outsiderness — there was no way them being discovered would end well. Perhaps they weren't even friendly. Perhaps if they knew about Abby, it wouldn't end well for her, either.

If she could just turn slightly, just get a proper look at them, maybe she would know if they were hostile —

Crap.

The whole server groaned under protest as she wiggled her torso around. There was no way they hadn't heard.

"Hello? Is someone there?" one of the voices called out. "You did do a scan for life before we entered the room, right?"

"Well, we were in such a hurry —"

"Zerlan!… Alright. Do one *now*!"

She waited a beat as a little 'zip' noise bounced about the room. What could she do?

"Nothing yet — ah, yes, there. Someone's in here with us. Eosian — the local human offshoot, I believe — male, mid-teens."

Well, they'd find her anyway — may as well stop hiding.

"Female, actually," Abby corrected, squeezing out from behind the server box. "I thought you were guards, or workers, but you're clearly not meant to be here either, right? Neither am I. I won't turn you in if you don't turn me in, deal?"

This was quite possibly the stupidest thing she'd ever done in her life. These were outsiders, aliens, unknowns — they could hurt her, or kill her, or take her away.

Except they didn't look like they wanted to harm her. They were humanoid — two arms, two legs, and faces that looked just as confused and frightened as she felt.

One of them stepped forward.

"Hi, um, Eosian female. I am Nardeth. You are right, we aren't meant to be here. We're looking for a special material to fix our craft so we can get off your planet. She's heartbroken, you see, and she needs us to make her a new valve, so she can fly again. We mean you no harm, and will not disturb your people once we've got out material."

"How can a craft be heartbroken?" Always too curious for her own good, but she just couldn't help herself.

The dark-haired figure she'd noticed earlier began speaking. "Our ship is alive. She has a heart, and a mind, just like you and me — Eosians do have hearts, right?"

Abby nodded

"Just one?"

"Of course — why? How many do *you* have?"

"Not important. Anyway, our ship, she travels the stars, but she needs to be able to tell our reality from the others, make sure we don't get… shall we say, drawn off-course. The reality valve in her heart lets her do that. But she's an old thing, and the valve broke, which sent us crashing here. We need to find some kind of storage bay, so we can get the material we need to grow her a new valve."

Okay, everything made sense now — these people were clearly nuts.

"Right… Well, I'll just be off, then, shall I?" She tried to skirt around the trio of aliens, backing away slowly.

"We know how it sounds!" The woman spoke this time. Her hair was fluffy in a way Abby had always wished hers was, and she seemed a little calmer than her compatriots, who were both fidgeting nervously. "My name is Mrellin, by the way — those two knuckleheads are Nardeth and Zerlan. They're my friends. Zerlan was the engineer at my old job, but now ze helps us fix up the ship, whilst Nardy mostly does navigation."

Perhaps she thought sharing this information would help calm Abby down?

"Look. You don't have to believe us — all you need to know is, we won't hurt you. You said you won't tell anyone we're here. Is that still your position?"

Abby looked between the three. "Yeah, sure." She nodded slowly. Then, an idea began crawling into her head — it started at the base, tugging at her brain stem before climbing up across the corpus callosum like a set of monkey bars, until it had spread across her whole cortex.

"Hey, didn't I see you trying to hack into that computer?"

Zerlan smirked, proud of zir abilities. "Yeah, just to try and find us a map or something. We're a bit lost here."

"Well, good news for you lot — I can help. I have a map of this part of the factory, and I know my dad's password to the system — maybe we can help each other out. You see, I'm an intruder, too. I came here to sabotage the factory."

The aliens had given her their story — she should extend the same trust.

"That factory is right next to my town," she explained once she had let the statement sink in. "It pollutes our air, and it messes with the weather. They plan to put up a whole bunch of other factories, but only if the company owner sees the factory here is going well, so if I can mess up this place before then, the plan

might not go ahead. Could you do that for me? Help me sabotage the system, and I help you find the material for your heart?"

Nardeth — a light-haired person with unfairly large eyes — turned to the others, reaching out a hand. They almost seemed to have some private conversation, all without moving their lips. Finally, they told her what she needed to hear.

"Okay. Deal. We'll be back here tomorrow evening — it's way too risky to try breaking in during the day again. Think you can be here about three hours before midnight?"

Abby's heart hadn't slowed the whole conversation, and it was showing no signs of doing so now. "Deal. I'll see you then. But I want to know everything — around here, all the stories are the same old stuff on repeat. I want something new. Tell me — who are you? Where are you from? How can a ship be alive?"

"Tell us your name first, kid," Nardeth replied, and Abby felt a blush spread up her cheeks for forgetting such a common courtesy.

"I'm Abby. Abigail Stein. I live just down there, across from the factory, in E-18. That's our neighbourhood. Now, your turn."

And the three told her the most wondrous stories- of galaxies, and of time, and of war. Things she could never imagine, that even they struggled to explain. "You can call us Lightbringers. We used to work for this… organisation, but let's just say it was a toxic work environment, so we left. Before that…"

The tale they wove was long and complicated and fantastical. They hesitated, in places, as though unsure that she would believe the next bit, no matter how many times she assured them that she was following along. They seemed, as a result, to speak in questions.

Can you imagine a palace built out of time? A whole world of sand and glass and fire — it was our job to protect it. Can you imagine the smouldering grass, the twin suns, the shimmering seas and wild winds? Elementals of time, sailing through time on the backs of their Greater forebears — can you feel them? Can you understand a soul entangled in a machine, her beating heart of possibility the only thing between you and the universe.

If any part of the webs they weaved were true, then surely, helping them would be worth it. Helping another soul is always a good thing, so surely, that should apply to lost Lightbringers. These outsiders could very well be her

saviours.

Day Four: Abby Is For Abaddon

Sunday. What a pointless, boring day, full of history essays and leftover latkes and tidying her room just to keep her hands busy. The evening could not come fast enough, and even then, she felt some reservation about leaving in the middle of the night without telling her family.

But she would be back by morning. Now, there was work to be done.

The next day was a school day but that should not matter in the face of justice. After dark, Abby divested herself of her pyjamas and donned full winter wear — before the factory, night was around minus ten degrees at this time of the year. Over time, this had risen to barely below zero.

Still cold enough for hats, gloves, and scarves, but never enough for snow.

Her grandma had been coughing more lately, and today, she had fallen over. Leah had insisted that she was fine, because that is what Memaws always said, but Abby couldn't help but worry.

Would her grandma ever know what she was doing? Would she be proud?

She didn't have time to think too deeply as she hoisted herself out of her own window and down to her garden gate. Looking back, she watched her quiet house, still and dark, before making her way back to the factory.

The Lightbringers were already waiting in the same room from the day before, no time to waste. She punched in her dad's password — he used the same one for everything, Ab14ABBA, which he told her was about an old Earth band she'd never listened to. As a floor manager, he had access to enough of the company's system to find what they were looking for — a map of the full building. He didn't have access to an inventory list, but they figured that it would be best to head down to the storage cells in the basement. If this cardio-ethylate they needed was anywhere, then surely, it would be there, in the belly of the beast.

The trio turned towards the door, but Abby blocked their path, arms crossed. "Aren't you forgetting something? Complete your end of the bargain. We need to cause severe disruption that won't be fixed in the next couple days."

Zerlan sucked air through zir teeth — these aliens sure acted just as human as she was, with their normal mannerisms, normal walk, normal clothes — except the way they spoke. Now, that was different.

"Okay, you drive a hard bargain, but here we go. It would probably be better to go with the software, nor hardware, since everyone checks the hardware first. It'll take longer for them to figure out the problem."

Struck with a sudden thought, Abby interrupted zir. "Wait, this is from my dad's account- they won't know it was him, right?"

The air in the room began to ignore her, she was sure of it. Silence hung threateningly, or as threateningly as a lack of something could hang, as Zerlan considered her issue. If she got her dad in trouble, she'd never forgive herself. But this was important. Finally, her chance to do something good, something rebellious- something her grandma would be proud of.

The alien waved her concerns off with one hand. "Relax! I'll bury the code so deep in the system they'll never find it — he'll never be linked to this. Trust me. I'm an alien, I have advanced technological knowledge!" Abby smirked. Of course, everything was fine.

Absent-mindedly, she trailed her fingers across the table while she waited for the job to be over. She wished that the factory hadn't been cleaned, so she could be making pretty patterns in dust, but the table was spotless.

She picked up her water bottle, then, walking over to the server-box she'd hidden behind the day before, emptied half the contents into the structure.

Mrellin raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"What? More is better," she explained.

"True. Maybe you should short out a few computers too. For good measure."

The two women slowly grinned.

Within the hour, Nardeth, Mrellin, and Abby had vandalised just about every computer on the floor. When they ran out of water, Nardeth produced a permanent marker and they began scribbling over screens, so no-one would be able to use them. Abby giggled — this was the first time she'd truly let loose, done something wholly against the rules. Why had no one ever told her how truly *fun* crime could be?

By the time they returned to the server room, they were breathless and jolly-faced from racing across corridors. Zerlan had finished — they logged out and scribbled over that screen too, just for the hell of it. The four began making their way down to the basement, ready to retrieve the material for their reality valve.

"So, you get this cardio-ethate —"

"Ethylate," Nardeth corrected quietly, looking around in case they were being followed. They seemed the most nervous of the three, always the first to worry about potential trouble.

"Ethylate," she repeated. "And then, how does that become a valve? Do you have some kind of vacuum former?"

"No, it's not a plastic," Zerlan jumped in — always the first to explain anything to do with technology. "It's an organic material. It's extracted from myethene berries, which only grow on a few planets in the whole universe, and then under high pressure turns into a strained, brittle substance that we can feed into our GTE's imagination orbs. These take the material and turn it into a valve."

"That seems… needlessly complicated."

Zerlan pouted. Nardeth laughed; it was the first time they'd smiled since Abby had met them. Mrellin, meanwhile, produced a small device from her pocket — some kind of disruptor, she said, the design 'poached from a renegade'. Whatever that meant.

The device made a small chirping noise, and then the door swung open.

Before them was a truly massive area, damp and crowded with boxes shoved onto shelves haphazardly, the regular shapes of trolleys broken with protruding poles, and the floor slippery with dirty water, dripping from somewhere directly above them. This was nothing like the neat, ordered monochrome of the world upstairs.

"You'd think the wealthiest business in the galaxy would keep better order of their stock" Nardeth mused out loud, their wavering voice echoing terribly in this labyrinth.

"This will be difficult. How will we find anything down he —"

"Found it," Mrellin called, her small device beeping excitedly. *Look mum, I found a cool rock!* it seemed to scream as she got closer. "Here, help me shift it, will you, Zerlan? We should only need one roll."

"Coming," Ze called, dropping whatever component ze'd been investigating eagerly to come to her aid. Nardeth plodded over to watch their friends as Abby turned back towards the door.

“Hello? Is there someone down here?” There was that smell again; that acrid burning, infecting her nose as her heart betrayed her practised calm expression. But no, this wasn't just getting caught with her hand in a cookie jar; this was serious. Someone was coming. She could let herself show the panic, just a little, as she went to the door.

Five steps away.

“Friq, is that you? I warned you once about these stupid pranks. Come on man, it's nearly midnight, just let me have a nap.”

Four steps.

The guard stopped walking. “Seriously, if it's you, just tell me. I won't tell. Just stop fucking around — we're only a couple days away from that inspection thing.”

Three.

“You're not Friq…” The guard mumbled, evidently realising that his friend wouldn’t still be yanking his chain. “Intruders! Put your hands up — I’m armed!”

Fuck. Not at all what she had expected — had she expected anything? Had she expected never to be caught?

Two.

“There will be consequences if you do not reveal yourself. I'm coming in.”

One.

Abby stood back as the door swung open in front of her. She felt something in her hands- some heavy metal plate from the top of a nearby box — and vaguely wondered when she’d picked it up. Before shock could register on the guard's face, she closed her eyes, and felt her arms swing the plate outwards.

Breathe. In, out, in, out. There's that smell again… She opened her eyes. The guard was sprawled on the floor, unconscious. Something rust-coloured was smeared across his forehead. With a sick feeling growing in her stomach, she realised she had drawn blood.

“Hey, I heard a noise, what — oh.”

Nardeth was staring at the guard. Abby couldn't draw her eyes from her own hands — how could she have done this? She'd be in *so much trouble… Dad will never forgive me… this whole thing was a mistake, and now it's too late to turn back…*

Even as she panicked, Nardeth was checking the guard and murmuring to themself. "Heartbeats sound regular… That taser means he's a guard. Mrell!" they called, and the other two Lightbringers appeared, carrying a small roll of what looked like a thin sea-sponge.

"What do we do?" Abby whispered, though she clearly meant *what did I do*.

"Don't worry, we'll figure it out." Nardeth bit their lip. "Maybe we can bring him back to the ship? Get him out of the way until that CEO guy has left?"

"That'll be days! Besides, I'm not sure she'll like having a stranger stashed in her, especially while she's vulnerable. Knowing her, she might go on strike." Mrellin's brow furrowed as she considered the possibilities.

Abby spoke without moving. "You can't mean we just… keep him? That's kidnapping. That's a crime."

"So is rendering someone unconscious, stealing, vandalism… Better he goes missing for a few days than us getting arrested," Nardeth explained pragmatically.

The smell, that horrible burning, it only got worse the longer they discussed this.

"But —"

"He's seen your face," Zerlan spoke carefully, kneeling in front of Abby so she had to look at zir, take in zir calm manner, and start calming down too. "We just need to make sure he doesn't tell anyone about us — *any* of us. Then we can let him go."

Slowly, the teen nodded. "Okay. Okay, but only until he promises not to snitch."

Zerlan laughed at her choice of words, and they set out towards their ship.

As they left the factory, the clock struck midnight. In four days, Andrew Oakleigh would come to E-18. They were running out of time.

Day Five: Hard Choices

Moonlight was cascading across the grass as Abby and the Lightbringers reached their ship. Even as they were just toeing the foothills, she could feel something *magnetic* about the strange cabin they were heading towards. It whispered ancient secrets and beckoned her eyes to *just see something different*. The cabin was a disguise for some great force beyond all human — or Eosian — comprehension, and she could taste it, just beneath reality… Some strange, ethereal presence.

Shaking her head, she followed the confident trio. Mrellin carried the guard slung over one shoulder like she'd done this before. Abby didn't dare ask.

"So, a cabin?"

"Ah, she may look ordinary on the surface," the Lightbringer replied, confirming her suspicions, "but I promise you — there is a whole world of wonder between those four walls. Which aren't actually wooden, by the way. Like most of our engineering, it's all about perception — your perception of dimensions — it's about relative frames of reference," they rephrased. "The subjective interior dimensions when you're standing on the *other* side of her front door are pushed out of step with the subjective dimensions of the exterior reference frame. Cool, huh?" Zerlan smiled, but this quickly dropped as they remembered where they were, and what they were doing.

Abby didn't stop to gaze in amazement when she stepped through the unassuming not-wood door and into the very belly of the creature she'd heard calling, just beneath her usual field of hearing. She didn't ask what all the levers did, and she barely let her eyes do more than drift over the swirling, indecipherable patterns on the walls. If they even were walls.

Instead, she turned to Mrellin, who produced some rope from who knew where and lashed the guard to a metal pole that formed part of a handrail. She squatted in front of him, watching as his eyelids began to flicker — once, twice, and… *now* he was awake.

"It's late," she stated simply. He looked from side to side, then back at her, opening his mouth — presumably to begin firing accusations, or perhaps threats. She quickly put a finger to his lips.

"It is way past my bedtime," she continued, "and I'm tired. This doesn't have to be a big thing. I just need to know you won't tell anyone about us."

The guard kept staring at her, mouth in a small 'o' like a goldfish.

She sighed. This would not be easy.

"Come on, what's your name? Is it Gary? Gary the Guard?" She was edging towards rambling, but for once she trusted her gut, and let her mouth run away. Her weight swung back as she sat on her haunches, one fist under her chin.

"Steve," he said slowly. "But you…"

"Kidnapped you, yes. We'll be here forever if you just keep stating the obvious. So, Steve. Steve, Steve, Steve!" She rolled the word around her mouth, getting to know the feel, the shape, the way it bounced from one side to the other. "Tell me Steve. You're not going to turn us in, right? I mean, we're all friends here"

She could practically hear the Lightbringers trying to hold their laughter in. She'd clearly stolen this forward persona from a TV show, but they wouldn't stop her. She seemed to be having fun now — her hands were fluttering, just slightly, as she made punishingly intense eye contact with their prisoner.

"Friends? What do you mean, 'friends'?" Steve the Guard didn't seem to be getting any handle on the situation, protesting against its absurdity with the pique of a child clinging to his one remaining certainty. "You kidnapped me!"

"Because we had to! You see, I didn't mean any harm — I am just trying to save my town. Well, my friends' towns, really. You weren't meant to be there. So, if you swear you won't tell on us, then you can go. Simple. So, do you promise?"

Steve fidgeted erratically, twisting about himself as far as he could. "I'll scream!" he stated, seeming to gain a great deal of clarity from the sudden inspiration. "Yeah, that's what I'll do. Someone'll hear me!"

Abby tutted. "Not so smart, are you now, Steve? See, we're plenty far from civilisation —" Mrellin shut Nardeth's open mouth with a single glare, "— and there's way more of us than of you. So… Just promise?"

Steve seemed to consider his options. His head began to move — slowly, surely, he nodded.

"Okay. Sure. Just let me go, and no-one will know you were ever at the factory."

Abby let out a great puff of air, sliding back so she was fully sitting back on the floor, hands propping up her torso. "Now, I'd love to believe ya Steve, but I can't be sure now, can I? Look, I want to let you go, I really do, but I just don't know."

Zerlan leaned over to zir friends, whispering as ze watched Abby's performance. "Why don't we just, I don't know, wipe Steve's mind?"

"I don't *want* to wipe Steve's mind," Mrellin replied. "I'm starting to like this clown. Besides, can either of you do it? No? Well, to be honest, neither can I. You need practice, or really high telepathy skills, usually both. Otherwise you might wipe the poor guy's whole life, and that just wouldn't be fair."

"Just tell me what you want from me," Steve said, a tremor in his voice as he processed what the alien had just said.

"Hmm. Maybe… Why don't you give us a really embarrassing piece of information. Mutually assured destruction, right? If you tell on us, then you know we'd share your secret. You cheating on your partner? You ever killed a man? Do you have pictures?" Abby fired off eagerly, egging on poor Steve.

"No! I'm an honest, boring guy, I swear!"

"Hmph. Well, that's bad news for you, because I can't let you go without something like that. Hey, here's what'll happen — it's late. I am going to go home, and I'm going to sleep. I'll come back in a bit, and you can have thought of something by then, right? Everyone's got something."

Steve's breath began to quicken, and Abby tried not to sneeze as that nose-burning stench got stronger. "You can't just leave me here! Please! You can't —"

"Relax, Steve. This is our place — we'll lock you into a guest room, alright? Bring you some breakfast in a few hours. No need to panic," Nardeth responded, kneeling to untie the man. He was still panicking, but surely, the Lightbringers could handle it.

Abby stood up and walked out of the Greater Time Elemental's insides. The whole space just made her feel queasy, like how the smell of vomit makes you need to vomit too. They did say she was heartbroken, but she didn't think it was so literal… She could swear that, underlying the unfathomable shapes and colours, there was the smell of rotting flesh. It had made her giddy, too, that all-surrounding organicity — she'd never felt quite so *alive* — but too much was too much.

And, of course, she was not entirely sure how real she was anymore, nor indeed the people around her. Any honest summary of the last few hours sounded like a demented dream.

But still. *So alive.*

By the time she'd plodded back to her house and shimmied up the drainpipe to her window, she didn't even have the energy to remove her shoes before she flopped on the bed. She dreamed of burning smells and burning houses, of a man with a scarf and a woman with a knife. Of flowers and rotting flesh and an empty factory.

Only a few hours later, she was struggling through the dark to the school bus. That day, she barely kept her eyes open through her lessons — only one teacher asked if she was okay. She lied.

"M'fine, just tired," she mumbled as the bell rang, and she dragged herself back to the bus.

* * *

"This is going too far. We should get out of here," Nardeth spoke firmly, meeting Mrellin's eye.

In fact, they didn't speak; they *sang*, in the lilting, hymn-like tongue of the Lightbringers. There was no point in speaking the local language anymore; Abby wasn't here to listen to this conversation, nor would she ever hear about it if they could help it. Whichever way it ended.

"We can't — Abby can't do this alone. She's just a kid. We have to stay," Zerlan spoke against them, carefully placing down an empty tray.

"We kidnapped someone! I don't care how young she is, or how much she needs us, that's too much. Too far. I can't — we can't —"

"It's okay. It's *okay*." Mrellin grabbed their hand and waited for their breath to slow. "It's not like what happened to you. I know we have what we need, but Zerlan is right — we made a promise. We need to make sure Abby doesn't go further, do something she'll regret. It's our duty to keep promises, and to help people where we can".

"We've *already* helped! Zerlan did the software thing, and we scribbled on all those computers —"

"But if something goes wrong, she'll need us. She's clearly going to do this anyway; we may as well stay and see it completed."

Mrellin always seemed to give the last word. Even with Nardeth's nervousness, she was in charge, keeping them calmer as they moved the

discussion on to how long exactly it would take to generate the new valve, and when their ship would feel well enough to fly.

* * *

Upon returning home, Abby was met with a surprise: Her father was pacing, frustrated.

Careful, she placed her bag on the counter. "Hey Dad, what's wrong?".

He stopped pacing.

"Today's just been a mess."

I know how you feel. She didn't say that out loud, of course.

"I got to work, and guess what? The construction lines were malfunctioning. As long as I've worked there, that's never happened, not once. Our engineers think it's a software problem, and they can probably fix it before Mr Oakleigh's visit, but it still has everyone a bit frantic. And then, we found that a lot of computers wouldn't turn on — the screens just stay black. It's all just bad timing — don't worry, we'll sort it out. But there is something I need to talk to you about. Maybe you want to sit down for this."

She stood there, making no move to grab a chair, so he continued.

"You know your grandma has had a bit of a cold?" Abby's heart skipped a beat. "She's, well, she's getting sicker. We went to the doctor and he thinks it could be more than a cold, and even if it's not, at her age… We just need to be more careful of her, okay? Help her around the house, that kind of thing. Well, I know you probably have a lot of homework, don't let me keep you."

His voice was strained, tense. Abby didn't know if she should be worrying.

"Okay," she said, but the word seemed to fall away before her, into the abyss. His back was already turned, back to pacing the kitchen.

She headed straight back out. The walk felt shorter than before, not long enough to sort out her thoughts.

Leah had always been a constant in her life; some ancient, unmovable force that had shaken the world and made the stars. She couldn't imagine her as some invalid, stuck in bed all day — she'd be bored out of her mind.

Zerlan told her they'd figure out what to do with Steve, and that she shouldn't worry about it — Nardeth would return to the factory a bit later, try to search

Steve's locker for something they could hold over him so they could safely let him go. She nodded without saying a word.

Day Six: Losers, Weepers

There were only two days until Oakleigh arrived. Two days to do the impossible.

Today was a Tuesday, and Abby daydreamed all through maths. She messaged her dad that she'd be home late and went straight to the lightbringers. She hung around outside for a bit, almost afraid to face that feeling again, but soon Mrellin met her and brought her in from the cold.

It was always a little colder, further from the neighbourhood.

Mrellin's face was grave and drawn, and Zerlan's incessant pacing reminded Abby a little too much of her father's worries back home.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Mrellin bit her lip. "It's Nardeth. They never came back from the factory last night. We think — we think they've been taken."

Abby pretended not to notice that she was crying. She wiped her eyes too quickly for questions.

"Well, what do we do? How do we get them back?"

"That's definitely the right question. Zerlan thinks we should sneak in, but I think it's too risky- do you know anything? Have you heard of someone being kept there?" Abby shook her head. She'd barely spoken to her father the last few days, and didn't know any more than they did.

"Okay. Okay — *fuck*!" Mrellin suddenly yelled, making Abby jump. "I'm sorry, sorry, it's just, you were our best hope. Only hope, really. I just — I don't know what to do."

"I'm not your only lead," she said quietly, but her words echoed in the space between her and the aliens. They both turned back to her, listening intently.

"What?"

"We have someone who knows the factory intimately, staying in your guest room."

Before she knew what was happening, Mrellin was marching away from her, Zerlan quickly following. Abby gulped; going further into the ship rather felt like walking directly down the throat of an infinitely long viper, but she didn't feel she had much choice, so swallowed her fear and tiptoed after them.

The door banged open.

"Listen up, you little twerp." Uh oh. "My best friend's been kidnapped by your shit-for-brains employers, so you'd better tell me right the fuck now where you could keep a prisoner in that stupid factory you worship, or else!" She grimaced, reaching out a fist. Slowly, she extended her fingers, one at a time. Steve closed his eyes.

She tapped him on the cheek.

"Well, let's just say it won't be good for you."

"Uh, I don't —"

"Come on, Steve!" Abby wandered into the room behind Mrellin. "I'm sure you know that place inside and out. I mean, that was your job, and I know you're good at your job. Smart guy like you. You must know all the best hiding places, the rooms the manager keeps locked up, says you can't go in… There's got to be somewhere like that. And, wherever it is, I'm sure the best guard in Azanon Industries knows it like the back of his hand." She blinked quickly — that always seemed to work in movies.

Steve actually seemed a bit disturbed by it, but shook himself, recovering quickly.

"I'm really not the best guard there. My friend Friq is really —"

Mrellin smashed her fist against the foot of the bed. "Urgh, enough of this!" She reached down and grabbed Steve's arm. "Come on. We're going to get them, and you're coming with us. You can show us around."

Zerlan coughed. "Uh, Mrell? You sure this is a good idea?"

"We don't have *time*." Her voice was a low growl as she strode out of the room, Steve scrambling to his feet behind her.

Despite her reservations about Mrellin's method — or rather, lack thereof — Abby ran after her and Zerlan as they crossed the grass towards E-18. As they rushed past her house, she realised just how quickly the dark was descending, and grabbed her pad to send her dad a quick message — *Been struggling with quadratics. At a maths club thing — home late.*

She didn't have time to acknowledge the burning in her nose that came with the lie. The burning in her lungs took precedence as she dashed after the lightbringers and their captive. Mrellin seemed to have done something to him, because he wasn't making any noise, and Abby hoped that it wasn't permanent.

The factory seemed more like a fortress against the setting sun. Reds and oranges backlit steel and smoke that stung her eyes as she got nearer. She swore everything should be shut down by now. In only a few minutes, they found out why it wasn't.

Stealing through the corridors was more difficult when the factory was fully operational, so they stuck with the balconies. The building used to be something else — Abby had never found out what, because it had been vacated before the first Earth settlers arrived, just one last remnant of a lost civilisation. They skulked along the sides as quietly as they could, but Mrellin's fury spoke volumes.

Peering through a window, Abby slowed down for just a moment, overhearing one of the lead managers giving some kind of briefing.

"… We'll need everything at double efficiency. No, triple! We should have more product ready than usual. He has to be impressed, or people might start losing their jobs. Now, we have two days…"

Abby shuddered. Two days and they were one team member down.

Mrellin saw what she was doing and turned on her heel. "Abby, take Steve and hide. Here!" She practically threw the man at the teen, who helped him tuck into the darkest corner of the balcony.

"Hey, Steve."

"Whasuhewhatsitmmm…" he murmured. Abby stared at him oddly.

"Dude, what did she do to you"

"She licked my brainbowl!"

"What."

"*Shhh*! Madness," he whispered in an airy, dream-like tone, and waved a finger lazily in her direction — then he lay down.

Zerlan stood back against the railing and watched vengeance work its magic on zir friend.

Mrellin knocked on the glass. Once, twice, three times. Smash!

Her fist went through. Everyone inside turned to her in shock as she brushed off the fractals of broken glass.

"Hello, bastards. You took my friend, and I am very, very angry. And you do *not* want to make me angry."

She stepped through.

Abby watched on in a strange sort of pride. *Attagirl.*

"Listen, if this is what I think it is about, then your friend was trespassing." The man at the head of the table seemed unperturbed, simply raising an eyebrow at Mrellin's grand entrance.

"Jeff? You know what this is about?" The other two eyed their colleague suspiciously.

"Oh, he knows. He knows exactly where my best friend is, and he will tell me, right now."

Abby gulped. Going off the plan didn't seem like a good idea — then again, with the factory so busy, they'd have gotten caught by now anyway. At least Mrellin seemed to be enjoying herself — everyone had a dark side. Even aliens.

"Or what? Threats don't work if you have no leverage."

Jeff seemed confident, smirking. His blue suit was un-creased and well-pressed, but plain. Dull. Boring. All the villains from her storybooks were larger than life, massive men of myth with dastardly plans and dark, elaborate clothes, but these men seemed more like the ones her grandma told her about; powerful but normal men who stood in the way of ordinary people living their lives. Nardeth didn't seem ordinary, but they still should be free.

"*Or* we won't give *your* man back." Oh, that's right — her side had captured someone, too.

Jeff laughed. "My man? Now you really are clutching at straws — I think I'd know if one of our managers had been kidnapped by some maniac."

Mrellin bristled. "Don't play the fool. Not a manager — your guard. Steve."

"Steve? You think I care about some *guard* this close to D-Day?" Jeff stood up. "We're done here. You can leave the same way you came in — but we *will* track you down and sue you for the property damage."

Abby mumbled under her breath — "Really? A billion-credit company?" — just as Mrellin called out to the arrogant manager.

"Really? You think you can just walk away?"

In a flash, she was pressing Jeff against a wall, the other men exclaiming like kids being yapped up by the first dog they'd ever met as their leader protested loudly.

"*You*, mortal, will tell me where you're keeping your hostage, and then we will return ours to you. That is not a negotiation, that is an *order*." Her eyes burned with something acrid, and Abby wondered if that was what her grandma looked like when she was drafting peace treaties and making everyone *just stop fighting*. This certainly didn't *feel* like de-escalation, but it also felt *necessary*.

Abby watched. She watched as Jeff snapped his fingers at his colleagues impatiently. She watched as one of them left the room, his dark grey suit-tails swishing behind him. She watched as, finally, they brought Nardeth into the room, and Zerlan helped Steve through the hole in the window.

Nardeth was shaking, terrified. Mrellin jumped to their aid without skipping a beat, leaving the three executives to vacate the room, with Steve catching on and lumbering slowly behind them. Jeff stopped for a moment and turned to the window, hungry eyes scanning quickly over Abby and Zerlan before he decided that whatever he was about to do wouldn't be worth it, and left with his compatriots.

"Steve never agreed not to tell them who we were. Are you sure we should be…?"

"Don't worry. Mrellin did the thing." Zerlan sounded grim.

"What thing?"

"Oh, uh, we're kind of a bit telepathic. None of us are very good at it, so we weren't going to risk wiping his mind in case we did it wrong, but Mrellin tried to blur his memories. He'll be back to normal soon, but shouldn't be able to pick any of us out of a line-up."

"You're telepathic? You can, like, hear thoughts? So, if people were thinking about the bad things they could do to someone… Is that why Nardeth seems so…"

"Not okay? Uh, no." Mrellin was stroking Nardeth's forehead and whispering soothingly as they began to unravel from their ball of fear. "It's kind of a long story, but let's just say something like this happened at our old job."

"Your job? What — what do you mean?"

"I don't think I should say. Just — all big companies are alike." Ze walked forward and helped Nardeth up, and they staggered down the stairs together.

The Lightbringers went home, Mrellin holding Nardeth's hand as they stumbled across the grass. Nardeth would need time to recover, and Abby had to go back to her real life, ready for another exhausting day of normal. The sun was practically rising by the time she clambered into bed, and that night, she did not dream at all.

Day Seven: All In

Wednesday was not a good day.

In fact, that Wednesday would quite likely go down in the history of Bad Wednesdays as one of the worst Wednesdays to hit E-18 in quite some time. If badness was measured by how much it affected Abby Stein's life specifically, it would be right at the top.

That morning, Abby woke up tetchy after only a sparse couple hours of sleep. She crept downstairs to find her father, head in his hands. He looked up as she walked in.

"Abigail" Uh oh. He never used her full name. A storm was brewing behind his eyes- she sat down on a stool before the kitchen isle, fearing the worst.

"I was fired this morning. By message — not even in person, after all these years — but what really surprised me is why. Jeff told me that I had become a liability because you, Abby, had trespassed onto company property. Committed vandalism. They said you broke a window. How could you?" The contempt in his voice was enough to bring her to tears.

"I'm sorry, daddy!" She could feel the hot tears streaming down her face, but didn't stop to wipe them. "I had to! They're gonna expand, and then the weather will change for everyone, and I made this graph, and Mrellin was the one who broke the window —"

"Mrellin? What are you talking about? Listen, Abby —"

"Oh, what? You're not mad, just disappointed?"

"Oh, I'm mad. You lost me my *job* — look. We'll talk about this more when you get home from school. Just, grab a bagel and get to the bus."

She stared at him, fire in her eyes to match his. Finally, she ran off.

Abby didn't go to school. She ran across the field to the foothills, skidding down to the strange cabin and banging desperately on the front wooden panels.

"Can I hang out here today?" she asked as soon as the door opened. Mrellin took one look at her red eyes and tear-tracks and let her inside.

She felt like a coward. She felt like pure evil. She wanted — no, she *needed* to puke, cry, throw a lamp, bash a rock at someone's skull — she needed to lash out, to *explode*. She had no room.

"Are you okay? Do you need —"

"Alone. I mean, can I just, I just need alone time right now. I have to go."

She tugged large strands in front of her face to hide herself as Mrellin told her where to go. In a flash she was down the hall, into the spare bedroom that Steve had surely left a mess. She swore she saw something shifting in the dark, but she blinked and everything was still. And neat. It's all straight and neat and clean and tidy and —

She screamed.

Quietly.

She threw a fit in the darkness when she turned off the lights, and she tossed everything she could feel away until she was alone. And she screamed again. Ugly and furious and burdened.

Every time her pad buzzed or rang, she threw another pillow, screamed again, buried herself deeper.

The girl was buried so deep she could not see out.

She turned the lights back on.

The room was messy again. Everything was away from her, with Abby at the centre of the blast. The lines of bedsheets and pillows and blankets and *order* lay defeated as she, the victor, the warrior, slowly un-balled from her foetus position. One by one, she picked up the pieces and laid them around her to form a nest, making her the robin's-egg, waiting to hatch. A snatch of white on the bedside table turned out to be a notepad, and she grabbed a pen from her backpack. She'd swung it over her shoulder reflexively before storming off that morning, and, damn, was it already not-morning? Because Zerlan was knocking on the door and saying ze'd made lunch, some pastry thing that ze was leaving outside her door for when she wanted it.

She waited until zir footsteps withdrew — how could she face the aliens, after breaking down in their own home? And then she snaked one hand outside her little sanctuary, and brought the food inside her nest. One bite and a lot of doodling later, she was lost in her thoughts, irretrievably rooted in the little hotel notepad she controlled with her click-pen.

When someone came to check on her- she didn't look up to see who it was — they saw a barely-touched plate of food and a whole lot of planning. She scribbled furiously, focused on how she'd make it all okay again.

Step one: Take down the factory before tomorrow.

Step two: Show dad I don't need him Convince dad that I had to do this.

Step three: Done.

Step one:

Explosions? Software. Hardware.

Weaknesses: People???

Try the front door, no, not that- A protest? Who would stand with you. Incite a riot?

How. Make an impassioned speech? When has that ever worked outside the movies.

Her padscreen lit up — *Where are you??? Come home.*

(Missed call)

Your teachers called. You never turned up.

(Missed call)

Seriously, we need to talk.

It's about your grandmother.

She turned her phone off.

Eventually, the aliens persuaded her to come out of her room for dinner, because '*Founders damn it all, a growing girl needs to eat!*'. She barely looked up the whole meal, still adding to her plans, perfecting and refining and *making it all perfect*.

"So, does anyone want to talk? Or maybe play something — ahm, I don't think Eosians have four-dimensional chess — I know, how about Risk?" Zerlan suggested brightly, shot down quickly by Mrellin's protective glare.

Nardeth curled up a little. Abby continued to ignore everyone.

"…Okay then."

And that was the last time any of them tried to make conversation over dinner.

Zerlan was apparently a very good cook, having made some potato-rice-stew concoction that hid its starchy nature through excessive leeks. They were alright, as vegetables went, leeks. Didn't demand anything from you. Didn't ask you why you'd gotten them fired.

One hand absentmindedly fingered a device as she ate — she didn't even realise it was her pad until she heard that small chirp, her eyes automatically drawn down to *She's in the hospital.*

She turned the phone off again.

After dinner, Nardeth took the plates in as she presented her ideas. *Listen up, class, one of your peers is speaking!*

"I have an idea, but I'll need you all for this. And also, please don't question the origin of this plan, because yes I have been magpieing from every coming of age highschool dramedy ever and no, I am not stable enough for someone to point it out." She took a steadying breath.

Zerlan nodded. "We've already stayed longer than we need. May as well see this through —" Mrellin coughed, and Zerlan course-corrected. "What I mean is, of course we'll help."

Abby smiled. Encouragement.

"Okay. Here's the thing though — we have to do it tomorrow, when Oakleigh is actually there."

"Cutting it a bit fine, aren't we?" Nardeth spoke up from their shy position, wadded into a corner of the couch.

"That's kind of the point, which means — we won't get another chance. This is it — our last stand."

Day Eight: Last Chances

"So, there I was, nervous and terrified. My leg was jiggling something terrible in the back of this old cargo truck — that's how we snuck in. They'd seen our faces already, so we were in hiding, like proper fugitives. I was meant to be at school, but where I most wanted to be was the hospital, with my gran. Something you'll need to learn, though, is that we don't always get what we want in this world.

But, if we fight hard, we can get what we need.

Nardeth was still pretty out of it, but they'd been given a task, so seemed pretty focused. Zerlan was alert and on edge as the truck unknowingly carried us four through the back entrance of the Azanon factory, into a loading bay. I gave a nod; Mrellin made a signal, and out we all rolled, just when the back doors opened. And, I swear, the look on those unloaders' faces! That's sure something I'll treasure forever. But I didn't have time just then to enjoy it, because we had work to do.

Andrew Oakleigh, our nemesis — though he'd never met us, wouldn't pay us any mind — had arrived that morning in a vintage luxury sedan. His crest was all blues and greys. Nothing was visually exciting in that company, least of all the CEO. He wore a grey suit, black shoes — even his hair was boring. It had a middle parting, and it swooped off to each side — grey, of course, to match his trousers. Before, I'd heard so many people describe him; he exudes confidence, they said, he's all suave and fit, he's the most charismatic man you'll ever meet. Well, I never saw any of that. Then again, I suppose there's a lot of people who'll find a trust fund baby charismatic on principle, if just for the cash.

He certainly was a billionaire, because though he looked so utterly boring, his dull clothes were clearly well-made and exclusive. His tie probably cost more than my dad made in a year.

Zerlan had the first job — ze darted around the factory, telling the workers to go outside, that there'd be a big speech by Oakleigh about how to move up the ranks and it was mandatory for them to attend. Ze used some computer trick to tell them all, so they thought it came from one of their bosses, that Jeff guy I told you about. Clever, huh? Then again, of course I'd say that — I came up with this plan, after all.

Next came Mrellin's job, carrying a data-stick into the main server room that we all knew so well and plugging it in. Zerlan had given specific instructions,

and soon, everything was going haywire. Every bit of machinery in the place stopped responding, the production lines were shutting down — all while Oakleigh was still inside. Oakleigh was frowning whilst the managers quietly debated who to fire.

It felt so odd, seeing the machinery cause so much chaos and fear after meeting the creature known as a Greater Time Elemental. She was this incredible beast; exposing even a sliver of this temporal whirlpool beyond my understanding was enough to make me feel sick to my stomach, and yet that was how she lived. How could any technology be so flimsy when I'd met one who was so robust? So alive?

But my part hadn't come in yet. I was waiting, watching by the sidelines for my cue while Nardeth counted down the timer. We had to wait- I'd decided about fifteen minutes into the speech would be enough to work people up a bit. They should have felt secure, but instead were tense, waiting for the next attack on their systems. They knew one would come.

Well, we didn't need tech, not really. Nothing sophisticated for the next part. Because, fifteen minutes in, just as Oakleigh raised his voice on the bit about 'protecting our right to work', Nardeth was meant to be pulling the fire alarm.

Somewhere, in that factory, something was going wrong. We hadn't counted on the alarms not being pullable — I'd never really noticed before, just figured that it would be a health and safety violation not to have fire alarms everywhere, but it turned out there were none. Smoke detectors only. That way, they could eliminate the possibility of someone pulling it to get out of work.

Janice did that, once. We were in Biology and she was dared by Bobby, who sat one row over from us. Just as Mr Rob Sua's voice was droning on and on about stamens, she leaned out behind her and yanked, hard. We all trooped out with the rest of the school — got to miss the rest of class, and get the teachers all worked up into a tizzy because they knew there hadn't meant to be a fire drill that day. Well, we got the last laugh — Janice was never caught.

Anyway. Luckily, Nardeth had the brilliant idea of 'actually set something on fire'. They could have just waved a match or lit a cigarette under one of the many smoke detectors, but hey, they were going through something. Sometimes you just have to light something on fire. I get it.

The sprinklers turned on, and the last few workers left in the factory came rushing out in droves, yelling at Jeff that the building was on fire, right as Oakleigh looked on. He didn't seem well pleased, I can tell you that.

We all held our breath. This was my bit.

Mrellin walked out the front doors and nodded to me as she did. I was standing on the sidelines of the speech, a beanie pulled low over my face so I wouldn't be noticed. Slowly, deliberately, I drew out the trigger from my pocket.

Bang.

The whole place went up in a blaze of smoke — room upon room of products, destroyed. Machines melting under the pressure of the blast. I hated the smoke as it blew towards us, wished there was another way, but I knew this was the last time that something of Azanon's would be smoking up my town. Necessary action to allow inaction — necessary violence to ensure peace.

That was what my grandma had done, all those years ago. I'm not sure if she was right. I don't know the whole story — perhaps I never will — but I know that I don't regret blowing up Azanon Industries' first — and last — foothold on Eos 6. At least I made sure no one got hurt.

Oakleigh did not approve expansion. In fact, that factory was never rebuilt, and Azanon Industries cleared out of our planet for good. Years later, some legal stuff came out about them, and system-wide boycotts led to them shutting down completely. I think those boycotts were really the first time the people of Eos 6 gathered together for one cause — after the accident on Glostol, no-one felt like they could ignore the fight. That was the turning point, I think, of when we all started to gather together, properly meet each other — I have friends from all over the world, now, and that never could have happened if I hadn't taken a stand with my new alien friends.

They had to go back, you know. Back to the stars. They are gone from this world and onto the next, but we cannot forget to honour them: Nardeth, Zerlan, and Mrellin. Remember them. They told me their people are not usually so kind, but they are different. *We* are different.

My grandma told me that too, that kindness can be rebellion.

"But I blew up a factory. Even if I did what I had to, how was that good?"

Leah was propped up on two pillows in her snow-white hospital bed, tubes poking out from under her gown sleeves. We talked to the beat of the heart-rate monitor. I sniffed, trying to hold back her tears. My grandmother took her hand.

"Hush now, don't cry — you silly girl. It doesn't matter if it was good, it matters if it was right. Was it kind, bubula? Were you kind?"

I just sort of… melted.

"I kidnapped someone! How can that ever be kind?"

The Lightbringers had followed me to the hospital, and it was then that they interrupted my spiralling mind. "You never hurt him. In my book, that means it wasn't a real kidnapping. He'll forget all about it," Nardeth told me seriously. I wondered what they had seen, before I met them — how many galaxies? How many stars, collapsing? How many fights like this one?

"Besides, you did do what was kind — you helped us, remember?" Zerlan piped up from the doorway as Mrellin knelt beside me. "You didn't have to do that. You would have found another way to sabotage the factory, but then you found out that we needed help, and you changed your plans to help us. Without you, our friend would still be dying."

Mrellin made her thoughts clear, too. "Making sure that your friends didn't lose what you had lost, that the snow still falls in the wintertime — that is kind. Thank you for your help, Abigail. If you ever need anything, here's our number. Our ship will let us know if you need us."

I did not walk the trio back to the Greater Time Elemental, who was now healed and happy, raringto go. No, I stayed with my grandmother. I had to know.

"Grandma? Would you have done what I did?"

"Probably not," she sighed — and then, after a pause, she spoke again, a distant, wistful look in her eye: "Back in the old days, I probably would have started a riot."

I knew my mouth was hanging open at this point, but didn't care to close it. She laughed — I must've looked like a fish, gulping air like that.

"I think you went a safer route. The way you did things, no one got hurt. If this is how young people solve things, the future might just be bright yet. You were not unkind. That is a badge of pride — wear it alongside your little trans pin and march to its beat, Abigail. You didn't hurt anyone."

"What about dad? He lost his job. How can we recover from —"

"How can he forgive you? Foolish, foolish child… I will explain it to him. He will see that you did the right thing, all you could do. And he can get a new job."

I'm forever glad that my grandma got to know what I did, and that she could provide me some sense of reassurance. Afterwards, I talked to my dad, and explained how it really did feel like the whole world was on your shoulders when you're seventeen, and have no close friends to confide in. He understood, in some ways — *weren't we all rebels at seventeen*? — but I'd still lost him his job, and so it would be a while before he could be proud.

Taking his hand in mine, I told him: that's okay. I don't want to be some revered hero right now — I just want to be seventeen.

It would take some time before our weather patterns returned to pre-factory levels, and so, we could not go sledding there. Instead, I left the hospital, and caught the bus out to neighbourhood E-3. I chucked a snowball at her window and when she came out, I told her that I missed her. That winter, we made scaresnows and snow angels, and sledded down the hills nearby for as long as I was allowed to stay. Together, we built a snow-factory, and together, we smashed it to pieces.

And that's the story of how your old teacher defeated an industrial giant, may very well have saved the world, and won you all back your snow."

Around the old cabin the air was cool and disturbed. A huddle of fascinated children listened to Abigail Stein as, all around them, flurries of snow fell and swept them into a rapturous joy. A fire burned at the hearth as children outside hurled snowballs at the windows — and, somewhere, a very similar-looking cabin may have had three faces peeking out, admiring just how far E-18 had come…

* * *

In our bleak midwinter/When we have won the day
We will lay our weapons down/And in the snow shall play.